

“You Gals Who Want to Be Free”: A Feminist Perspective on the Evolution of Woody Guthrie’s “Union Maid”

Emily S. P. Baxter

Folk songs are a specific kind of poetry. They are symbolic and rhetorical. They are also, although it seems contradictory, both contextual and universal. “Union Maid” exemplifies this, maintaining cultural relevancy at nearly seventy-five years old. Yet the ways in which it has evolved over time play out many of the “grand tropes” of women’s, especially women workers’, history in the United States. There were other “women’s union songs” written around the same time as “Union Maid,” but this song has had a particular sticking-place in the feminist-folk-labor imagination and it is particularly ripe for a feminist analysis. This essay explores “Union Maid” as a changing song and examines its place within understandings of American women’s labor history.

“Union Maid” is a song of protest or, more accurately, a rallying hymn to protest. It tells the story of a woman, a devoted union member, who could not be dissuaded by the “goons and the ginks and the company finks.” She organized “the guys” and she “always got her way/when she struck for better pay.” She stands up to those who are, presumably, stronger than her because the union has her back. The song is about confrontation and speaking her truth to power, as the chorus goes: “You can’t scare me, I’m sticking to union, I’m sticking to the union, until the day I die.”¹

Textual interpretation of simple, short, and catchy songs may seem overwrought, but the image of a stalwart, crafty, and ambitious woman as a tool for inspiring collective action cannot be overlooked from a time where women school teachers were routinely fired after marriage based on the idea that they should not need to work,² a time when it was still possible to exclude women from juries or certain occupations based on their sex,³ a few years before Rosie the Riveter appeared on the scene, and a full twenty-three years before Betty Friedan – an erstwhile union organizer and labor journalist⁴ – began to speak about a “problem that has no name.”⁵

Yet, the most well known version of the third verse is a definite shift from the actions of the Union Maid as a workingwoman and union member to an endorsement of marrying within the union:

You gals who want to be free, just take a tip from me;
Get you a man who’s a union man and join the ladies’ auxiliary.
Married life ain’t hard when you got a union card,
A union man has a happy life when he’s got a union wife.

Despite describing the mutually beneficial aspects of marrying a fellow union member, it can be a bit of disappointment to the modern listener with a critical ear for women's equality. A song that begins as a triumph for the plucky woman worker, "Union Maid," ends with the assumption that married women do not work, but rather take their place in the "traditional" and stereotypical confines of the home, left to join not the union, but its ladies' arm for mothers, wives, and daughters.

Woody Guthrie wrote this song in 1940, prompted by a question from Ina Woods, a labor activist: "Isn't it about time you wrote a union song for women?"⁶ The question made sense: in 1940, roughly 25 percent of American women were employed. The number was, as it has been throughout American history, higher for women of color and immigrants, who were more likely to suffer from economic and structural disadvantage; for example, by 1940, one in five white women over the age of fourteen were in the workforce, while the number was one in three for black women.⁷ Of that number who worked, 9.4 percent were union members. The number grew during the Second World War, however, to three million unionized women – or 21.8 percent of all women workers – in 1944.⁸ Women were active participants in the labor movement, but were often relegated to the sidelines when it came to leadership.

Guthrie described writing the song as a collaborative effort between himself and Pete Seeger, while Seeger later described it as having been written solely by Guthrie. Moreover, Guthrie is most commonly credited with writing the first two verses – which describe the Union Maid's actions for workers' rights – while Millard Lampell is often given credit for the third verse. According to Seeger, it was only added when the Almanac singers wanted to record the song and found it too short.⁹ In fact, when the Almanac Singers toured the country singing for union members, they were met with mixed success; but the songs left a mark. Millard Lampell said:

Our *Talking Union* album didn't hit the juke boxes, didn't cause Victor or Columbia any sleepless nights, but it was being distributed by a lot of CIO affiliates. As a wildfire of strikes raged across the country, two and a half million Americans were walking picket lines. It excited us to hear that ["Union Maid"] was being sung by cotton mill workers in North Carolina, by strikers at the International Harvester tractor plant in Minneapolis, by hospital workers in Chicago and aircraft workers in Los Angeles.¹⁰

Will Kaufman suggests that the song springs from a place of deep anger in Guthrie's writing, although, the anger appears to have been more directed at the violence and economic injustice in the American labor movement

than anything relating to the role or situation of American women. Guthrie cited a woman he called "Mrs. Merriweather" as inspiration for the work. Guthrie wrote: "Mrs. Merriweather was the Union Sharecopper [sic] lady that Vaughn Riles and Ralph McQuire stripped naked and beat up, then hung her for dead up to a rafter in the little shack."¹¹ In extended note from the manuscript of another song, "Union Maid #1," Guthrie retells the story of Annie Mae Merriwether, an African American woman who testified before the NAACP sometime in the 1920s or 30s. As Kaufman says, she "was sexually brutalized and nearly lynched for daring to join the radical, interracial Share Croppers Union in Montgomery, Alabama."¹²

The song itself is both graphic and moralizing, as this excerpt shows:

You have robbed my family and my people,
My Holy Bible says we are equal,
Your money is the root of all our evil,
I know the poor man will win this world ...

This bloody crime was done
Out where the buffalo run,
By old Bob Ryles
and Ralph McQuire
With a knotty rope
They soaked in blood.
As this Union girl they beat
[They] Said, "I want naked meat,"
They swung her up to a rafter there
For saying what she said.¹³

It is important to note, however, that from Kaufman's description of the manuscript, Guthrie's emphasis in retelling this catalogue of brutality is on Annie Mae Merriwether's status as a union worker only; the fact that she is African American and a woman is all but left out and she is almost entirely characterized by her victimhood. Partially similar to the well-known version of the "Union Maid," the woman's only power lies in her speech act, which the chorus leaves as a final impression. The widely-known version of "Union Maid" and "Union Maid #1" have very different and goals as protest songs – one to rally and inspire, one to commemorate; yet it appears that they share a common inspiration.

The Third Verse

The varying iterations of the third verse of "Union Maid" showcase the song's importance as a cultural marker for women's history in the 20th

century and changing understandings of equality in the United States. There is a parody version from 1959, written by Richard Ellington and Dave Van Ronk, in which the Union Maid's fear of anything communist, socialist, or "radical" keeps her in her union. She laments her fate: "Oh you've got me scared,/I'm sticking to the Union/And Harry Truman, As close as glue, man." In the third verse, she bemoans: "Married life can sure be hell,/If you're in the AF of L."¹⁴ Mark Allen Jackson notes that it is more a critique of "old left" personalities, like Woody Guthrie, and it certainly is more a mocking of political fear mongering than it is a comment on working women.¹⁵

There is a version attributed to Nancy Katz in the Industrial Workers of the World's *Little Red Songbook* around 1973:

A woman's struggle is hard, even with a union card;
She's got to stand on her own two feet and not be a servant of a
male elite.
It's time to take a stand, keep working hand in hand,
There is a job that's got to be done, and a fight that's got to be
won.¹⁶

Another 1960s/1970s version whose origins are harder to trace, but is attributed to Fanchon Lewis and Rebecca Mills, goes:

We modern union maids are also not afraid
To walk the line, leave jobs behind and we're not just the Ladies
Aid!
We fight for equal pay and we will have our say,
We're workers, too, the same as you, and fight the union way.¹⁷

There is yet another version attributed to Cappie Israel in the *Rise Up Singing* collection from the 1980s that goes (Blood and Patterson 259):

You women who want to be free, just take a little tip from me;
Break out of that mold we've all been sold, you got a fighting
history.
The fight for women's rights with workers must unite;
Like Mother Jones, bestir them bones to the front of every fight.¹⁸

Finally, at Pete Seeger's 90th birthday celebration in 2009, Dar Williams sang, in a little more academic than poetic vein:

You women who want to be free, take a tip from me,
Join your hand with a union man into the 21st century,

As Angela Davis found, we're all together bound.
Let race and class and gender join to stand on common ground.¹⁹

Each of these versions is probably more satisfying to a singer in 2015 than the original verse, but each also shows its age in subtle ways. Feminist history in the United State is defined by stages of increasing recognition of the differing goals of women who seek equality. In its first wave, women fought for suffrage, as well as education and the right to work, among other things. In its second iteration, the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s sought the empowerment of women and the dismantling of social structures that prevented them from being equal players in public life. This is played out subtly in the *Little Red Songbook's* version of "Union Maid," which urges women to create a united front against a unified male oppressor.

While such language and unity enabled great strides toward achieving equality, subsequent generations of womanists and feminists recognized that oppression came not just from a distant patriarchy but also from other societal structures and even other women. What it meant to be a feminist meant different things to different people and all women (and many men) regardless of race, class, or gender and sexual identity, shared some goals and disagreed on others.

This history is shown in the 1980s and 2000s versions of the third verse: there is a call to unite around history – that is, Mother Jones, the workers' rights leader of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and Angela Davis, a living women's rights activist and scholar who has championed the rights of African American women, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. The Dar Williams verse, too, does not necessarily reference marriage (not all women marry men, after all) but recognizes that men and women with different identities and demographic intersections can fight for rights together. In all, the various versions of the third verse, including the original, unite around one thing: standing strong and uniting in the fight for freedom through justice.

Woody Guthrie: Feminist?

There are those who suggest that the "Union Maid" song, as a whole, is an indication that Woody Guthrie was a feminist, pro-feminist, or a proto-feminist of some type. Michael Kimmel includes the song among a series of historical texts related to "Pro-feminist men" throughout American history.²⁰ This idea gains support if one only takes into account Woody Guthrie's contribution of the first two verses. David Kinkela — who, it should be noted, does attribute the third verse to Guthrie — strikes a comparison between "Union Maid" and Guthrie lyrics that remained

unpublished until Billy Bragg and Wilco's *Mermaid Avenue* as a means of talking about Guthrie's view on women.

The song "She Came Along to Me," on *Mermaid Avenue*, is notable because it suggests, in Kinkela's interpretation, that women were important and often unrecognized in labor movements – hence the lines, "But I'm sure the women are equal/and they may be ahead of the men" – but also that Guthrie would not share this opinion openly as it might cause tension between men and women. As for the lyrics, "Yet, sometimes the most lost and wasted/attract the most balanced and sane," Kinkela suggests that the "lost and wasted" are presumably men and that "the most balanced and sane" would represent women within the labor movement.²¹ He sees this as once again playing out tropes found elsewhere in Guthrie's music that, while showing strong female characters, place them in traditional mothering roles.

This is a valuable analysis, but I hesitate in reading between the lines to Guthrie's view on women. I think there is, in true Guthrie style, some humor in suggesting women are, simply, "ahead" of men. The humor obscures Guthrie's own opinion, and shows that it can, in my opinion, be difficult to deduce from some lyrics the true feeling of the author – is this entirely his opinion? To what extent does it play with the rhetorical position and depiction of women in folksongs generally? It is necessary to use caution when trying to separate fact from fictionalization, myth from the lived experiences of a man whose track record with the women in his life was complicated, to say the least.

It may be that it is easier to read between the lines in the personal, previously unpublished "She Came Along to Me" than in the rhetorical propaganda that is "Union Maid." Still, Kinkela is right in his basic point: at some level, Guthrie's position on women is debatable and contextual. As he puts it: "These songs suggest Woody Guthrie, usually cast as an uncompromising songwriter and political activist, yielded to or in fact believed in the gendered politics of 1940s and 1950s America."²²

In saying that Guthrie would not readily express his views on equality or by analyzing the original third verse of "Union Maid," we can recognize the perceptions of someone committed to freedom from oppression; but we can also recognize the context and conceptual limits of women's roles of his era. It is still worth noting that Guthrie specifically wrote about and for women in the labor movement. But he certainly wrote about them from the time and perspective that he inhabited, and the lyrics of "Union Maid" reflect this. For example, the Union Maid is faceless; all we know about her is what she is not. She is put in contrast to the "goons, ginks, and company finks," metaphorically opposite to them, symbolically only virtuous, pure, and noble. This is useful in a rallying song, because it can speak to many people.

Union Maids beyond Woody Guthrie

The second — and more important — issue that the many versions of this song suggests, to me, is that over the past seventy years the song has taken on a symbolic meaning all its own, beyond Woody Guthrie. There are articles and books with titles including "Union Maid" which do not deal with the song. In one instance, *Union Maids* was the title of an Academy Award-nominated documentary from 1976 about the reminiscences of three elderly women — two white and one black — who had fought for unions in the 1930s.²³ A quick Google search will produce not only that documentary but multiple online video renditions of the song at strikes and union events throughout the country even today.

"Union Maid" is a song that is meant to unite people and, therefore, relies on the writers' symbolic shorthand for women in a certain time and place — whether it was the 1940s, 1970s, or today. Just as we no longer see feminism as a totalizing and entirely shared experience, so too has this song evolved to encompass a broader understanding of working women. Appropriating and changing the lyrics is part of the folk tradition and it is played out interestingly here.

There is a connection between language, discourse, and how we create subjects, create identities, and conceive of power. Language does work in the world, like saying "you are now man and wife." Moreover, language itself both represents and creates the subjects and identities of which we can conceive. It is an idea that, while debatable, suggests that there is no conception of man or woman, male or female, and gender or sex that is not mediated by language and context.²⁴ This is exactly what is happening in "Union Maid." It was, at its inception, a song meant to inspire women workers to behave in a certain way, to create an identity of who they were based on who they were — it seems circular, but I think of it as co-constitutive. As perceptions changed, the song changed; as the song changed, perceptions changed. What are protest and rallying songs for but to inspire conscious action?

"Union Maid" is a song that is remarkable for its recognition that unions were gendered and that men and women had vastly different experiences. It highlights the trope that was common in labor movements, common to the civil rights movement, and I believe common to the interactions between women in the second wave feminism of the 1970s and 1980s: their role was contested. Women were present and active, but not — as the third verse of "Union Maid" reminds us — necessarily equal partners in the struggle for rights. They could not entirely escape the stereotypes and ideals of womanhood that were condensed and simplified into the symbolic representation of the lyrics of a rather straightforward folk song.

Moreover, continuing with these theories, where there is repetition, there is room for change. The failure to repeat the tropes, the decision to rewrite the third verse, reflect changing consciousness and changing needs to create an identity and subjectivity for workingwomen to rally behind. "Union Maid" is a lens that offers insights into history and conceptions of the self. And it seems likely that "Union Maid" will continue to do this, morphing and changing as it goes, for a long time to come.

NOTES

¹Woody Guthrie, "Union Maid." The complete lyrics are available at http://woodyguthrie.org/Lyrics/Union_Maid.htm. Accessed 1 April 2015.

² Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1984), p. 231.

³ J. Ralph Lindgren et al., *The Law of Sex Discrimination* (Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), p. 34.

⁴ Daniel Horowitz, "Rethinking Betty Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique*: Labor Union Radicalism and Feminism in Cold War America," in Vicki L. Ruiz, ed., *Unequal Sisters: An Inclusive Reader in US Women's History* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2008), pp. 500-501.

⁵ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), p. 7. First published 1963.

⁶ Will Kaufman, *Woody Guthrie, American Radical* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2011), p. 49.

⁷ Giddings, p. 232.

⁸ Ruth Milkman, *Gender at Work: The Dynamics of Job Segregation by Sex during World War II* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 85.

⁹ David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing? The Ballad of Pete Seeger* (Cambridge: De Capo Press, 1990), p. 131.

¹⁰ Quoted in Kaufman, p. 74.

¹¹ Quoted in Kaufman, p. 49.

¹² Kaufman, p. 49.

¹³ Quoted in Kaufman, p. 49.

¹⁴ Richard Ellington and Dave Van Ronk, "Modern Union Maid," *The Bosses' Songbook* (Self-published, 1959), p. 8. Available at <http://www.sds-1960s.org/TheBossesSongbookPart1.pdf>. Accessed 1 April 2015.

¹⁵ Mark Allan Jackson, *Prophet Singer: The Voice and Vision of Woody Guthrie* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), p. 36.

¹⁶ In Archie Green et al., eds., *The Big Red Songbook* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishing Co., 2007), p. 45.

¹⁷ Liner notes, The New Harmony Sisterhood Band, ... *And Ain't I a Woman?* (Smithsonian Folkways, 1977). Available at http://media.smithsonianfolkways.org/liner_notes/paredon/PAR01038.pdf. Accessed 13 January 2014.

¹⁸ In Peter Blood and Annie Patterson, eds., *Rise Up Singing: The Group Singing Songbook* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corp., 2005), p. 259.

¹⁹ A YouTube version is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wI7ONJ60Dlc>. Accessed 1 April 2015.

²⁰ Michael Kimmel and Thomas Mossmiller, eds., *Against the Tide: Pro-Feminist Men in the United States, 1776-1990* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 183.

²¹ David Kinkela, "Singing Once Again on Mermaid Avenue," *Radical History Review* 81 (Fall 2001): 153-161 (p. 157).

²² Kinkela, p. 158.

²³ Jim Klein et al., dirs., *Union Maids* (New Day Films, 1976). Available at <http://vimeo.com/46086339>. Accessed 1 April 2015.

²⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993).